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NEWS RELEASE

SOAP OPERAS PRESENT ANEMIC VIEW OF WOMEN'S HEALTH CONCERNS, ACCORDING TO NEW STUDY

DAYTON, Ohio — Soap operas present an unhealthy view of women's health issues and miss the opportunity to provide valuable information that can help women monitor medical concerns, according to a new University of Dayton study.

"There's the occasional breast cancer or AIDS story line, but they're more the exception than the norm," said Teresa L. Thompson, professor of communication at the University of Dayton. "Other issues about which women need to be concerned, most notably cervical cancer, are virtually neglected on soaps. Even heart disease is not presented in a manner that would reflect the seriousness of the concern for women."

Researchers analyzed 14 years of daytime serials and noted any health problem affecting a female character. They discovered that women are more likely to suffer from substance abuse or psychiatric disorders or be harmed through violent acts, such as rape or a beating, than deal with other real-life issues, such as infertility or eating disorders. Violent acts causing health problems occurred more than 1,000 times during the period studied. In contrast, uterine cancer was tackled once.

The study will appear in the July issue of *Women's Health Issues*, a journal for doctors, nurses and social scientists. It's believed to be the first study devoted exclusively to women's health issues on daytime dramas. It was conducted by Thompson, James D. Robinson and Louis P. Cusella — all professors of communication at the University of Dayton — and Sheila Shellabarger, associate university librarian in the Fordham Health Sciences Library at Wright State University. The only other previous study, published in 1979, examined men's and women's health issues and found that half of all characters faced some health dilemma.

"Doctors say that women will come in and see them because they've seen a health problem on a soap opera," Thompson said. "Some physicians treat their concerns with disdain because of the frivolous nature of the impetus. Other physicians view soap operas as a social service that make women aware of problems they may have. Doctors want to know what women are hearing about in soap operas because it affects their practices."

By analyzing 754 synopses of daytime serials from January 1985 to June 1999, the

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researchers discovered that “infertility, migraines, suicide, leukemia, eating disorders and cervical cancer are not dealt with nearly as frequently on soaps as in real life.” Instead, the daytime dramas focus on the sensational or the stereotypical. “The findings indicate much violence directed toward women, including hitting, beating, rape poisoning and sabotage,” according to the study.

The researchers also expressed concern about how frequently women suffered from mental illness, noting that the vulnerability of female soap characters to mental health problems “likely perpetuates unproductive and inaccurate gender stereotypes” about women.

“There’s a lot more mental illness in women than in men on soap operas,” Thompson said. “Mental illness is frequently used as an excuse for promiscuity. If you have multiple personalities, you can have all these one-night stands.”

Given the age of viewers of soap operas, Thompson said writers are missing the opportunity to set the record straight about menopause. The subject was broached just three times in 14 years. “Menopause, in particular, struck me as an issue that could quite usefully be addressed,” she said. “If soaps could help dispel the myths about menopause and talk about treatments, that would be a real service.”

Somatic problems, such as comas/unconsciousness/fainting, most frequently occur in soaps, followed by violent/illegal acts resulting in health problems, according to the study. Over the course of the study, for instance, substance abuse popped up 190 times. However, women are often drugged by other people. This happened 145 times.

In the mental health category, women frequently suffer from amnesia (186 instances) or multiple personalities (94 times). The study noted that the synopses never mentioned treating mental health problems through medication. Instead, characters entered mental institutions.

Daytime dramas thrive on story lines about miscarriages and dangerous pregnancies. Many deliveries happened in caves, barns or isolated locations during storms, without doctors or nurses, according to the researchers.

“It’s also interesting how abortion is treated. Lots and lots of characters talk about it, but almost no characters had an abortion,” Thompson said. “I’m not saying that soap operas should present abortions, but the occurrence is not at all consistent with abortion statistics. In the last several years, we found that fewer characters even thought about abortion than was the case in the late ‘80s or early ‘90s.”

Noting a study that shows soap opera viewers tend to be less educated than the general population, Thompson said that writers for daytime drama have an opportunity to both entertain and educate. “Why not choose to portray health problems that will increase people’s consciousness about general problems that they may face?”